

L'Appel du Vide by Mackem

Category: IT (Movies - Muschietti), IT - Stephen King

Genre: Alternate Universe - Everyone Lives/Nobody Dies, Anxiety, Coming Out, Cuddling & Snuggling, Denial, Divorce, Emotional Hurt/Comfort, F/M, Fix-It, Flashbacks, Fluff, Fluff and Humor, Getting Together, Hurt/Comfort, Losers Club (IT) Group Chat, M/M, Mutual Pining, NaNoWriMo, Nightmares, Pining, Post-Canon Fix-It, Sharing a Bed, Slow Burn

Language: English

Characters: Ben Hanscom, Beverly Marsh, Bill Denbrough, Eddie Kaspbrak, Mike Hanlon, Myra Kaspbrak, Richie Tozier, Stanley Uris

Relationships: Background Bev/Ben - Relationship, Background Stan/Patty - Relationship, Eddie Kaspbrak/Myra Kaspbrak, Eddie Kaspbrak/Richie Tozier, Minor or Background Relationship(s)

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2019-12-09

Updated: 2019-12-12

Packaged: 2019-12-13 01:32:11

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences

Warnings: No Archive Warnings Apply

Chapters: 2

Words: 16,114

Publisher: archiveofourown.org

Summary:

“Okay, all right, well, I think we’re done here,” Eddie sighs, but when he glances into the rear-view mirror, he sees a smile on his face, and his cheeks are flushed. He frowns as something occurs to him. “Wait, are we? What did you call me for?”

“You called me, Eduardo.”

“I called you *back*, idiot!”

“Yeah, yeah. I dunno, man,” Richie says easily enough. Eddie can hear his fingers rattling against some hard surface as he talks, restlessly drumming as he speaks. “I saw Stan, and suddenly I realised that I fucking missed him, and then hot on the tails of that I was like... *man*, do I miss Eddie, jeez! So I called. That’s all. No

biggie.”

“Oh,” Eddie breathes, and does not try to stop the pleased smile blooms with Richie’s words. “I, uh. I miss you too, jackass. God only knows why, but I do.”

Richie groans happily. “Man, that’s the stuff! Nobody insults me like you do, Eds.”

“Nobody deserves it like you,” Eddie grins, and Richie bursts into laughter. Eddie’s soul soars at the sound of it.

1. Chapter 1

Author's Note:

Super cool that Eddie and Stanley definitely lived through the clown movie to end up in a group chat with the rest of the Losers, right?

So this definitely got out of hand.

I tried my hand at NaNoWriMo, and many thousands of words later, here we are! I plan to post Mondays and Thursdays, on UK evenings, and this is all written and ready to go.

It's part group chat, because I am determined that these forty-year-old idiots all get to have happy lives after giving so much of themselves. It's also part prose, because I cannot help myself.

Slow burn. Slow, slow burn.

Enjoy!

Richie: *guys i know we grew up in maine and i should be able to handle this but i'm in portland right now and i'm freezing my balls off holy shit*

Eddie sits at his desk and eats his salad as he stares absently at the Losers Club group chat, his thumb hovering over the keypad.

He checks the chat often, and while it's rare that he'll initiate a conversation or offer anything up from his own life, he likes responding to whatever the others are up to.

It makes him feel closer to them.

Nothing compares to the seven of them being together in the same room, but if this is the closest he can get to that, he'll take it.

Bev responds before he gets the chance, sending an image to the chat: Jack Torrance frozen in ice at the end of *The Shining*, alongside a

laughing emoji.

Ben is next, hot on Bev's heels as usual, and Eddie cannot help but smile to himself. It has been months since the two of them got together, reaching out to each other and saving each other's lives with their love, and as far as Eddie can tell, they have barely been apart since.

The two of them are a bright spot in his life. They moved in together almost immediately after they left Derry hand-in-hand, and chose a place not too far away from Eddie in New York.

The three of them have dinner together as often as they can. They invite Myra to join their dinner dates more than once, claiming that they'd love to meet her, but Eddie refuses politely. She's busy, he tells them. She goes to so many activities on an evening. You can meet her another time.

He always turns up alone, and they both smile and hug him, and neither press the issue. He loves them so much.

Though he'd never tell them, Eddie privately thinks they're kind of sweet, even if they do provide a stark comparison to the state of his own marriage. It has never bothered him; he can smile fondly at their ridiculous co-dependent puppy-love, while also quietly volunteering himself for every upcoming out of state work trip.

He always ends up telling Myra he's the only person they can spare, and breathing a sigh of relief whenever he leaves the city.

Whatever. It's just a rough spot. Everyone has them. They'll get through it.

Somehow.

Ben: *I'm sorry! That sucks Richie! Didn't you bring a coat?*

Richie: *of course i brought a coat my handsome man*

Richie: *it's just a los angeles coat*

Richie: *suitable protection against somebody exhaling within five feet of*

me and nothing worse

Bev: *if I could handle Portland when I was 13, you can handle it when you're 40, Trashmouth!*

Bill: *This is on you Richie. Hollywood made you soft. We used to run around outside in just our shirts and never even feel the cold.*

Mike: *I second that. Bill's right. Why didn't you bring a better coat? Did you manage to forget your common sense along with your childhood?*

It's a very tempting set up. Eddie sees his chance and takes it, a sharp grin spreading across his face as he types quickly.

Eddie: *Mike he can't lose what he never had.*

Not his best jab, for sure, but it'll do for some chucks on a Thursday lunchtime, as a phantom Richie in his head helpfully puts it.

He finds that happening more and more, nowadays.

It always strikes him as strange, when he lets himself think about it; that he went for over twenty years not really being aware that he was missing people who could be so important to him, but now he has six friends to turn to whenever he wants.

Even if all he really lets himself turn to them for is amusement.

They don't need to hear about the list of complaints that sums up his life. Hell, Eddie has no interest in hearing it, and it's *his* life.

But he's so happy to hear about theirs, and to praise or mock them when required, and he can't help but clutch them close to him.

He finds they're always with him, nowadays, lurking at the back of his mind as he drifts through his life.

Ben points out the beauty in things Eddie has seen on a daily basis, but has never before appreciated. Bill comes to mind whenever Eddie is dealing with something stressful, reminding him to stay calm and remain in control of the situation the way Bill always had.

Bev pops up whenever Myra cajoles him into going shopping with her, pointing him in the direction of clothing more daring than he's ever indulged in before; she gently encourages him to change and grow and experiment, even as Myra frets about what kind of image he'll present to his clients if he strays from reliable white shirts.

Stan is can be relied upon to point out the ridiculousness built into his life, arching an eyebrow and smirking in agreement whenever Eddie is mentally calling anybody an idiot.

Mike usually pops into his head whenever he's trying to kill time after work, encouraging him to visit museums or other sites of interest; reminding him to appreciate the place he's in, and to learn as much about it as he can. It doesn't compare, he knows – Eddie is hardly trapped in New York the way Mike was in Derry – but Mike has always been kind of awe-inspiring in how knowledgeable he is, and there are worse ways to cool his heels before he gives in and heads home.

And Richie...

Truth be told, Richie is never far from his mind.

Eddie remembers, now that his childhood is once more firmly entrenched in his memory, that he and Richie had been all but inseparable when they were kids. All the Losers were, of course; it was rare to find them apart from each other, but rarer still that Eddie and Richie would be without each other.

Neither of them could ever have guessed that they would end up literally on opposite sides of the country from each other, but Eddie supposes he has a mix of his mother moving him away, Richie seeking fame and fortune in Hollywood, and that good ol' Derry memory-wiping magic to thank for that.

Still, even without Richie around to follow at his heels, Eddie finds him sneaking into his thoughts on a daily basis.

When he's trapped in a meeting and somebody is rambling, without pause and seemingly without purpose, Richie is at the back of his mind, mercilessly mocking them and keeping Eddie awake. When

he's stuck in traffic in the car, turning to the radio for entertainment, it's Richie he hears warbling along with it, pulling out his shitty shock-jock DJ Voice, the one that had always had Eddie in stitches before too long.

When he's staring uncertainly at the scar on his cheek, Myra's pleading about it being ugly and frightening and in need of fixing echoing in his brain, it is Richie he hears, reminding him that he is brave, and tough, and... and...

Cute cute cute!

Eddie swallows another mouthful of his salad hurriedly, and forces his brain back to the present. He chuckles to himself as Richie starts typing, stops, then starts up again.

Richie: *haha! got me good there spaghetti!*

Stan: *Wait. Are you really in Portland right now?*

Richie: *sure i am stan-the-man*

Richie: *i got a gig here tomorrow night*

Eddie's eyebrows rise in surprise. Richie has mentioned that he's started writing his own material, and Eddie is able to read between the lines enough to guess that it is proving to be a slow and painful process, fraught with more anxiety than Richie is willing to openly admit.

But he hadn't said anything about performing again.

Eddie is about to start typing again, hoping to pry some information from Richie, when Stan's next message comes through.

Stan: *Whereabouts exactly? Because I'm actually in Portland right now too.*

Richie: *?!?!?!!?!?!!!!!*

Richie: *stan!!!!!!*

Richie: *are you for real buddy??*

Stan: *Yes. My company has a conference here tomorrow. I flew in this morning.*

Richie: *!!!! where are you right now???? i'll come find you!!*

Stan: *Let's move this to our private texts. Nobody wants us to bore them with this.*

Bev: *stan!! yes we do!!*

Mike: *Are you kidding? This is insane! What are the chances of this happening?*

Ben: *I know, this is amazing! Guys!! :O Are you meeting up right now?*

Mike: *They may not even be close to each other. Portland's pretty big.*

Bev: *but it's us right? beating the odds is our thing. I bet they're close. god I'm on the edge of my seat!*

Ben: *She really is!*

Long minutes go past with no response beyond this. Richie and Stan, despite everybody's eager responses, have apparently made good on Stan's suggestion and switched their talk to the private texts. Eddie sighs to himself, just as itchy to know how this turns out as the rest of the group.

Eventually, as time stretches on with no response from either man, Eddie finishes his lunch and reluctantly turns back to his computer. But he can't stop himself from glancing impatiently at his phone as he works.

After a little while, a new message from Richie pops up. Eddie quickly scrambles to open it, and sees a video waiting in the chat. Eddie presses play, and waits impatiently for it to load.

Richie pops into view when it plays. His phone is turned on himself, his face filling the frame as he grins. Excitement shines from him, despite the dark circles around his eyes, not quite hidden behind his

chunky glasses.

“Get a fucking load of this,” Richie breathes, and takes off striding down a corridor. Doors flash past him as he moves, his head glancing at the numbers before he skids to a stop. He bounces in place, and announces, “Theoretically, behind door number, uh, 305, we have...”

He turns his camera to face the door, and raps shave-and-a-haircut at it. There is a breathless pause, before the person behind the door answers with a quick two-bits, and it swings open to reveal...

“Stan the man!” Richie shouts, and his phone focuses shakily on Stan’s familiar face. Eddie sees him clearly for just a second, long enough to take in the delighted grin spreading across his face, before Richie abandons filming altogether.

The image blurs as he moves closer and throws his arms around Stan, and Eddie hears both men laughing and the start of Richie saying, “God, I’ve missed -” as the video cuts out.

Thousands of miles away, his phone clutched in his hand and his heart thudding, Eddie laughs alongside them.

A picture arrives a second later; Stan looking flatly into the camera, his mouth a thin line with just a hint of a pleased curl at the corner for those who know to look for it, while both of Richie’s arms squeeze him in a crushing hug as he tosses his head back in laughter.

Ben: *Amazing!! :D*

Bev: *awwww guys!!!! <3*

Bill: *No seriously, what the hell! Is this for real? You’re not joking? Don’t tell me you’re even staying in the same hotel?*

Richie: *we sure are big billy style!!*

Mike: *Holy shit. This is incredible. I know this isn’t the most impressive way we’ve all beaten the odds, but this is still something!*

Bill: *And you guys REALLY had no idea you’d both be in Portland today?*

Richie: *are you fucking kidding me? i have way more important things to text stan about than his boring ass counting job. am i gonna be like hey stan count any good numbers today?? you maybe count 69 for a while and get some really sexy vibes from it?*

Stan: *The last thing he texted me about was whether or not I thought take-out would be fine to reheat after five days.*

Bill: *Fuck, Richie, you're disgusting.*

Mike: *Named and shamed. Stanley, you always were ruthless. I love it!*

Bev: *he deserves it!*

Richie: *ouch. he fucking looked me dead in the eyes and said checkmate when he finished typing that*

Ben: *Wow. I hate to pile on but Eddie's going to eviscerate you for even asking that Richie :(*

Ben is not wrong, but Eddie can't seem to find the desire to explode at Richie inside him right now. He can't stop looking at the picture of Richie and Stan, smiling softly at Richie's delighted laughter, but fixating on the dark rings beneath his eyes.

Richie is a social creature at heart, but Eddie suspects from their semi-frequent messages and phone calls that he's not exactly overloaded with company in Los Angeles. He has acquaintances beyond their little circle, he knows, but Eddie has never got the impression that Richie is close to anybody outside of their group.

Of the Losers, Bill lives closest to him. He and his wife live in L.A., apparently not too far away from Richie, and Eddie knows the two of them spend a lot of time together when he's in town, but Bill has been away on some film shoot in Canada for a while now.

Ben and Bev's occasional nomadic boat life notwithstanding, the rest of the Losers are all parked firmly on the east coast, and as stupid as it may be, Eddie can't help but worry about Richie being alone on the other side of the country.

It's ridiculous, and he knows it. Richie has been in L.A. for years now,

and until a few months ago Eddie had no idea who he was. Richie has coped just fine on his own until now.

Still. In every selfie he sends there is a tiredness to his eyes, and a tightness to his shoulders, that leaves Eddie worrying about him. Richie should have somebody there to ask about it.

Hell, Richie should have somebody there to change it.

Eddie's heart clenches again, longing and guilt swirling in a thick morass in his stomach as he glances instinctively down at his wedding ring without really being aware of why.

Then he closes the picture and types a simple, "Yes I am." into the chat.

It does the trick; even Stan sends a laughing emoji.

After a moment, another picture comes through; it shows Richie, staring warily into the camera from behind a chuckling Stan, most of his face hidden as he hides behind Stan's shoulder.

Richie: *you'll never take me alive copper!!! you'll have to catch me first and you'll never get past stan-the-hit-man!!!*

Stan: *I'm not sure why he thinks I'm on his side. Eddie, he is disgusting, and he is all yours.*

Richie: *oh shit truer words were never spoken haha*

Eddie blinks in astonishment as Richie's response arrives.

Even after so long apart he can hear Richie's response in his head, though his voice is caught somewhere between that of his teenage self and the adult he has become.

He can picture it so clearly: Richie flinging a hand into the air as he plays the part of the lovesick fool, the other clutching dramatically over his heart before reaching out to paw at Eddie's face, a ridiculous Voice spilling from him and a grin shining behind it all as Eddie scowls in return, looking away and hideously aware of both the irritable flush to his cheeks, and the smile threatening to bloom on

his face.

Richie was never one to ignore a chance to make fun of somebody, but Eddie had always been his favourite target.

Eddie assumes that it was because he was so reliably likely to get wound up about it all. Richie had a way of pushing buttons that Eddie didn't even realise he had. It had always been infuriating.

And, he admits in the safety of his own head, exhilarating.

Eddie had never been somebody who wanted attention from the world at large, but from Richie, it was a different matter.

Being the object of Richie's attention was like being bathed in sunlight. Too much and it burned, sure, but it was always worth it for the warmth he felt while it was happening.

Seeing Richie's attention turn to anybody else had always been a hollow victory. It meant fewer mom jokes and insults in the long term, sure, and there was certainly a finite amount of those he could take in a given time, but...

...but before too long Eddie always found himself seized with a restless need to march over to Richie and claim his attention, insulting and poking and demanding until Richie's mischievous gaze swung onto him, and the whole mess began again.

And some buried part of Eddie – some needy, jealous idiot who whispered that all the insults and mockery were worth it because it was *Richie* – opened like a flower and drank him in.

Now, faced with a message that seems simultaneously so astonishingly earnest and so ridiculous at the same time, Eddie is startled into silence.

He is certain that it has only caught him by surprise because it was written down.

Were Richie here to say it in person, Eddie is sure he would not be struggling to respond; he would throw an elbow into his gut and roll his eyes, and snap that Richie is a mess and that Stan is absolutely

welcome to be the person he comes to for such disgusting matters. Let Stan have his fair share of Richie Tozier-induced aneurysms. Eddie is sure another one will be along in a minute.

But Richie isn't here. He's thousands of miles away, beaming in delight at the sight of Stan, and Eddie is stuck with his thumbs hovering restlessly over the keypad of his phone as the seconds drag on into a long, uncertain moment.

A weird relief courses through him when Beverly responds in his absence, and the moment passes.

Bev: *stop texting you two! go enjoy yourselves together!*

Eddie: *Seconded. I'll get you another time Richie.*

Richie: *any time you want me Eds my man you just have to ask*

Eddie has absolutely no idea what to say to that, so he says nothing.

He does pointedly forward Richie an article about food safety in their private texts, to which he immediately responds with a vomiting emoji.

He tries to turn his mind back to work after that, and is mostly successful in focusing on it. So what if his thoughts occasionally stray to wondering what Richie's texts actually mean, or just how thrilled he would be if he suddenly found Richie in the same building as him?

Or to the way both Stanley and Richie are smiling so broadly at the sight of each other in Richie's brief video.

It's fine. Of course it's fine. Eddie loves both Richie and Stan so goddamn much that, honestly, the sight of them embracing fills his heart with warmth.

Richie and Stan have been friends since he met them – for years before Eddie knew either of them at all, even. The two of them met in kindergarten, and Eddie knows that their families soon bonded over being Jewish in a predominantly non-Jewish town.

It had always seemed natural that they were closer than most, even if

most people seemed to assume that Richie would hate Stan's prim, fussy approach to life, and that Stan would despise Richie's barely-controlled chaos.

Somehow, the two of them balance each other out.

Eddie can see the two of them interacting as clear as day when he thinks back.

Richie, forcing Stan out of his comfort zone, his mouth going a mile a minute as he badgers him into doing something dangerous and stupid and *fun*.

Stan, in return, standing firm in the face of some of Richie's more reckless schemes, mocking and snapping and pointedly keeping him safe.

Eddie tried his hand at that with Richie, sometimes. It usually just ended up with the two of them bickering and winding each other up, and whatever stupid plan Richie had come up with growing even bigger and more stupid with Eddie's input.

It was still always fun, though. Even if the two of them always ended up being yelled at by some furious adult, it was always brilliant to see Richie laughing and doing his best to talk his way out of trouble, usually with the opposite result.

Stanley never seemed to get Richie in trouble the same way Eddie did.

Maybe somebody like Richie just really needs somebody like Stan.

Eddie sighs to himself, reminds himself that he's being ridiculous. He tells himself that it is really, genuinely, wonderful to know that Richie has somebody around to keep an eye on him, even if it is only for a short while.

Then he resolutely sets his phone aside.

He drives home after work, and with his thoughts pounding restlessly in his skull, he puts his phone in the glove box while he does so.

Crashing his car during Mike's initial phone call was no doubt due to the sudden rush of frantic fear that his voice had summoned, rather than the act of taking a call at all, but it doesn't hurt to be careful.

Still, he curses under his breath when he pulls up to his garage and sees a missed call from Richie.

There's nothing stopping him from heading inside and greeting Myra. From dutifully listening to her recap her day and taking his evening dose of supplements and getting started on dinner. Richie hasn't even left a voicemail, and there are no further texts explaining the purpose of his call, which suggests it was nothing important. There's no reason to call him back immediately.

Hell, he could even head inside and casually call Richie back in the same room as Myra, in full awareness of the fact that she'd be listening in throughout.

Theoretically, at least. In reality, the mere thought of talking to Richie in Myra's presence leaves his stomach clenching anxiously.

Eddie had explained away his sudden trip back to Derry as a long-ago agreed-upon reunion with his friends which he had sworn to attend. Myra had immediately decided they must be bad influences, practically forcing Eddie to return no matter how often he insisted he wanted to.

She scowled at them all as Eddie showed her a picture, and then she recognised Richie's face from his various television specials, and launched into a scathing rant about his "so-called comedy".

Myra is not a fan of Richie "Trashmouth" Tozier.

So Eddie quickly closes the garage door before Myra can spot that he is home, and calls Richie back from the safety of his car.

The phone rings a few times before Richie picks up, and Eddie smiles instinctively at the sound of his voice. "- Does seven work for you? Okay, I gotta - Eddie's calling me - hi, Eds!" Richie says brightly, apparently battling several thoughts at once as usual.

"Hey, Richie," Eddie grins. The churning in his stomach dissipates

with the sound of his voice, as though nothing has ever been wrong at all. “What’s up?”

“Not much! Well, no, I mean, you know – can you believe this?” Richie laughs down the line. “I’m in Stan’s hotel room right now. We booked into the same fucking hotel without even knowing it, Eds! It just... felt right, y’know? Picking this hotel out of all of them, I mean. Mike said it best, that’s incredible. This shit is crazy, am I right?”

“*You’re* crazy,” Eddie grins, even though he knows exactly what Richie means. He’s had that feeling before; a gut feeling, a certainty that out of a few options, *this* one was the right one, without anything obvious directing him that way. Any decision he has made with that certainty settled in his gut has always worked out well.

Despite his earlier thoughts, his grin only widens as he hears Stan calling a greeting in the background. “Hey, Stanley! How you doing, buddy?”

Stan says something Eddie can’t quite make out, but Richie bursts into laughter. Eddie’s stomach swirls at the sound of it as Richie’s giggles tail off. “Oh, man. You catch that?”

“Not with you cackling in my ear like a goddamn howler monkey.”

“Ah, it’s fine. Just Stan firing some shots off at me. He hit the bullseye, obviously. Jesus Christ.”

“Never heard of him,” Stan calls in the background, and Eddie and Richie both dissolve into giggles.

“Hey, gimme a second, Eds, okay?” Richie asks, and Eddie’s ears are suddenly filled with a muffled, scratchy noise. He can vaguely hear the two of them talking, and then the sound of a door closing, and the line becomes clear again.

Eddie hears the swish of denim as Richie continues. “Okay. It’s just you and me now, Eddie Spaghetti. Stan and I are gonna go out for dinner in a while, but he’s got shit to do before then.”

“And you don’t?” Eddie asks, fingers drumming idly on the wheel as he wonders how best to breach the subject of why Richie is in

Portland at all. He gives up any pretence of being casual after a second, and asks, "So what the hell's the deal with this gig? You kept that pretty fucking quiet!"

"Of course I fucking did. I've been shitting myself since my agent booked it," Richie says without hesitation. "I didn't think announcing it would make it any more fun for anyone involved. Do *you* tell the world when you're about to have your twentieth prostate check of the year, or do you keep schtum because telling people only makes them worry about it?"

"Hey, dipshit, prostate checks are important in people of our age," Eddie snaps. "Prostate cancer is one of the easiest to treat as long as it's caught early. Have you not had a fucking prostate check yet?"

"Why, Eddie, if you wanted to talk about my asshole you only had to ask," Richie purrs, and Eddie rolls his eyes.

"Look, you fucking dickweed, just get booked in if you have any symptoms, okay?"

"Symptoms like what? What symptoms have *you* had?"

"Well..." Eddie stops, his thoughts whirling.

A voice which sounds suspiciously like Myra's speaks first, claiming that he's been peeing more recently, and that he's getting up at night more often, and that she's sure the Kaspbraks have a higher-than-usual propensity towards inheritable cancers, so won't he get checked out?

And he had ruminated on it, of course, and gone to see his doctor, of course, who had borne his anxious and pointed request for a check with her usual good grace. It had been fine, thank god.

Another voice – one which sounds like Eddie himself – says that Myra would have no fucking clue if Eddie was getting up at night, because they haven't shared a bedroom in years, and if Eddie *was* getting up more often at night, it was because of that goddamn fucking clown creeping into his dreams despite It dying in front of them all.

He clears his throat irritably. "It doesn't fucking matter what I've

had. Just mention it to your doctor next time you see them and see what they think. I'm not your own personal Web MD," Eddie says pointedly, over Richie's laughter.

He takes a deep breath and purposefully softens his voice. "Anyway, what's this shit about telling the world? The rest of us aren't the world, idiot. You can tell us."

"You don't need to hear about my job," Richie says, dismissal lying heavily on his words. "It's boring."

"You're a stand-up comedian, Richie! Somehow! Despite you being you," Eddie laughs, hoping to tease a chuckle out of him, and he can't help but smile when it works. "It has to be more interesting than what I do."

"Eddie my love, I could spend all day poking myself in the eye and still find it more diverting than whatever the hell you do," Richie says cheerfully.

Eddie hears a door close behind him as Richie apparently reaches his own hotel room and, now safe from the prying eyes of the public, he huffs a sigh. "Seriously. I'm either sitting in my underwear trying to find an interesting way to say something, and panicking about my manager being right and me never having come close to being funny, or I'm sweating my balls off on stage proving him right. None of you need to hear about that."

"Don't talk yourself down, moron," Eddie snaps, and Richie lets out a shriek of laughter.

"Eddie! With positive thinking like that you could be a motivational speaker, my man! Don't talk yourself down, moron," he echoes with such fondness in his tone that Eddie's cheeks flush red. "That's good, Eds. That's real good. I, uh, I might actually use that on stage, if you don't mind?"

"Sure, whatever, I don't care," Eddie says after a moment of silent surprise. "Quote me all you like. But you know what I mean!"

"I do not, in fact, know what you mean," Richie says in a sing-song

voice.

Eddie sighs, massaging his own temples. "Do not make me say it."

"Say what?"

"Richie!"

"Eddie?"

"Oh, shit, you're going to make me say it, aren't you?"

"Say what?" Richie says again, and Eddie can practically hear his shit-eating grin.

He groans, swallows, and squeezes his eyes shut. If Richie wants sincere, he'll fucking get it. "You're the funniest person I know," he says quietly. "And you're smart as hell, too, even if you'd be the last person to say it. You can do this. I know it's gotta be fucking terrifying, putting yourself out there on stage as, like, the real you, but if anybody could do it and really fucking ace it... I know it's you. You're funny, Richie. You can do this."

A stunned silence grows between them for a moment, before Richie clears his throat. When he speaks, his voice is suspiciously thick. "Well, geez. Maybe you really could be a motivational speaker."

"Don't get me wrong," Eddie grins, as warmth blooms in his chest. "You're still an asshole, asshole."

"There he is!" Richie trills, apparently delighted. "There's my Eddie!"

"You'll be fine, okay? I mean it. I know it. Hey, will Stan be there? Oh, god, you're not – your gig isn't for Stan's conference, is it?" Eddie breathes, suddenly hoping against hope that this is the case. He crosses his fingers. "Have you gone fucking corporate? Are you the entertainment for a room of fucking accountants?"

"I should be so lucky," Richie sighs. "Nah. It's for some students. They do some kinda open night thing, and they asked me to step in for one. I think they reached out as a gag, and then my manager convinced me to say yes, and that might just be the funniest joke of

the night.”

“Oh,” Eddie says, surprised. His fingers drum restlessly on the wheel. “That’s... great, Richie. Honestly.”

“It’s smaller than you expected,” Richie says, the ghost of a laugh behind his words, and Eddie sighs.

The thing is, Richie is clever. He always has been.

Eddie remembers their time at school all too clearly; days spent staring helplessly at textbooks, revising and quizzing himself and willing the information to just make sense already, all the while secretly thinking that it just wasn’t *fair* that Richie could spend entire lessons goofing off and neglect to do his homework and *still* get A’s on all their tests.

He was disruptive, and he had an attention span of approximately a nanosecond, and he was every teacher’s nightmare student, but dammit, Richie was *smart*.

He’s always been more perceptive than he lets on.

Eddie knows it’s on purpose; that Richie has always preferred to be underestimated, and to be spared the pressure of people’s expectations.

So he plays the idiot, and talks himself down, and does everything he can to suggest he’s the lowest common denominator in every situation – but not much gets past him, and whenever he drops the dumbass façade, it always catches Eddie off guard.

“That’s not what I meant,” Eddie protests, as shame squirms in his belly. “Richie, I mean it, I just... didn’t know *what* to expect. That’s all.”

“Did you forget that I’m a fuck-up, Eds?” Richie says, his words more patient than Eddie had expected he could sound. “My last gig bombed, and then I dropped off the radar to go *kill a dude*, and I came back refusing to fulfil any of my existing obligations due to, like, a fucking amnesia-related breakdown. You don’t get to be flavour of the month after pulling shit like that, my man.”

Eddie's frown is growing deeper by the second. "Wait, you had a breakdown?"

"What? No. Well, I mean, fuckin'... yes! It took place in a sewer while I watched my childhood – while I watched *you* almost get impaled on a space clown's crab claw. After you got stabbed in the face, and also after I buried an axe in the skull of the lunatic who did it. Does none of this sound familiar?" Richie asks pointedly, before his voice becomes strangled with horror. "Oh, god, Eddie, are you forgetting again, because I can't – Eddie, *please* -"

"- I remember, I remember it all," Eddie says quickly. "Beep beep, Richie, stop. I remember. I promise."

"Okay. Okay, yeah, okay," Richie breathes, and stops speaking for a long moment. All Eddie hears for a while is the harsh drag of his breaths as he struggles to calm himself. Eventually, he fumbles with the phone, and drawls, "Okay. Everything's cool with the Trashmouth."

"You've never been cool," Eddie says, and cannot help but let his fondness shine through his words. None of them had been cool at any point in their lives, except possibly Bev, who only achieved it by not having to try at all.

"I have never been cool," Richie confirms easily. "But if you can believe it, I am even less cool now than I ever was. I'm so uncool that not even the gigs offered by fucking accountants are achievable anymore. Though since when do you give a shit about me going corporate? I've gotta eat, Eddie!"

"Yeah, but you shouldn't fucking sell out to do that!"

"Oh, is that what you're worried about? Worry no more, baby," Richie drawls. "I sold the fuck out a long, long time ago. I don't even write my own material, remember?"

"You didn't. But you are now, right?" Eddie presses, and Richie falls silent.

Eventually, he sighs. "I'm trying, man. We'll see how it goes, huh."

He pauses for a second, and when he speaks again, he sounds brighter. "Stan'll tell me. He's coming to see me tomorrow. I've twisted his arm."

"Yeah, I'm sure it took a lot," Eddie says dryly. "I'm sure your oldest friend wasn't dying to see you perform."

"Dying," Richie echoes, and Eddie's heart sinks.

"Richie..." He swallows, and tries to find the words to shape his thoughts as his hand tightens on the wheel. It's too big; he settles for asking, "How is he?"

"He's good. I really think he's good, Eds," Richie murmurs, his voice uncharacteristically soft, and Eddie is suddenly so, so glad that it was Richie that Stanley ended up with today. He loves all of his friends, and honestly, he'd turn to any of them if he ever needed them in a crisis, but nobody can cheer them up like Richie. "He seems like himself, y'know? Just like the dude I remember, only taller. And hotter, obviously," he finishes with a laugh.

Eddie's eyes widen in surprise, and then a hot jolt of *something* flashes through him like wildfire, scorching along his nerves.

It feels almost like jealousy.

He laughs after a long moment, startled by his response and feeling ridiculous as he spins his wedding ring restlessly around his finger. "Obviously," he echoes, because it's objectively true. Even if he doesn't look at guys that way, Eddie can still tell that Stan is handsome as hell.

He's not sure why it bothers him so much to hear Richie say it, but it's true.

He avoids his own gaze in the rear-view mirror and starts quietly doing his familiar breathing exercises in the hopes of calming himself as Richie goes on.

"I'm gonna keep an eye on him while I'm here," he promises. "He's already said he's gonna stay on an extra day so he can see me. His company have only paid for him to be here until tomorrow, so he's

gonna crash with me after the gig. I'll do some prying. Make sure he's doing okay."

"Hey, do me a favour?"

"Sure thing, Eds. Anything."

Eddie smiles, and lets out a slow, steady breath. "Ask Stanley to do the same in return, okay?"

Richie pauses for a second, then huffs a laugh. "Are you kidding? I'm okay, Eddie. I'm always okay. What, are you worried about little ol' me?"

Eddie shrugs. He finds his eyes fixing on his wedding ring again as he murmurs, "Sometimes. You just seem tired, is all. Why, is there something wrong with worrying about my friend? It's not like it's a crime!"

"Well, you don't have to worry, all right? I'm fine," Richie says firmly before laughing. "Fine like your sexy little ass, Kaspbrak, damn!"

"Okay, all right, well, I think we're done here," Eddie sighs, but when he glances into the rear-view mirror, he sees a smile on his face, and his cheeks are flushed. He frowns as something occurs to him. "Wait, are we? What did you call me for?"

"You called me, Eduardo."

"I called you *back*, idiot!"

"Yeah, yeah. I dunno, man," Richie says easily enough. Eddie can hear his fingers rattling against some hard surface as he talks, restlessly drumming as he speaks. "I saw Stan, and suddenly I realised that I really fucking missed him, and then hot on the tails of that I was like... *man*, do I miss Eddie, jeez! So I called. That's all. No biggie."

"Oh," Eddie breathes, and does not try to stop the pleased smile blooms with Richie's words. "I, uh. I miss you too, jackass. God only knows why, but I do."

Richie groans happily. “Man, that’s the stuff! Nobody insults me like you do, Eds.”

“Nobody deserves it like you,” Eddie grins, and Richie bursts into laughter. Eddie’s soul soars at the sound of it.

There really is nothing like talking to one of the Losers.

Leaving Derry had not been difficult at all, the second time around. Frankly, Eddie would be happy never to set foot in the place again. He wouldn’t shed a tear if the entire place split in two and fell into the earth, buried under itself until it was completely forgotten.

But leaving his friends...

That had taken some effort.

He had been the first of them to head back to their old lives. Splashing around in the Barrens had been wonderful, in a disgusting way; just familiar enough to be nostalgic, despite his worries about the cleanliness of the water, and washing the stink of It away from them while surrounded by the laughter of his friends had been much-needed catharsis.

But as they headed back in search of a celebratory breakfast at what Mike promised was the best diner in town, he became more and more aware of the endless buzzing in his pocket, as Myra filled up his voicemail with frantic messages. He glanced at his phone again and again as they left the Barrens, the giddy chatter of his friends drowned out by his rising anxiety.

With It dead and gone for good this time, and with the scars on their hands fading reassuringly, Eddie had ordered an egg-white omelette and slipped awkwardly away from the group to call her from outside the diner.

He remembers glancing tiredly at his friends through the window as Myra wailed at him. They had all been talking over each other, excitedly stuffing their mouths and celebrating at the same time.

Except Richie.

Richie had been watching Eddie from inside the restaurant, his chin resting on his hand and his eyes distant in a way he couldn't parse. He had only quirked his lips briefly when Eddie met his gaze, then turned his attention to his coffee.

By the time Myra was done yelling, and crying, and begging him to come home *right now, please, Eddie-bear, you're scaring me*, Eddie's food was cold, and he had a ticket on the next flight to New York.

Richie had not seemed at all surprised when Eddie self-consciously announced that he'd was heading home for later that afternoon, even as the rest of the group crowded around him and tried to talk him into staying just a little bit longer.

Richie hadn't joined in with their pleas. He had just asked if he'd got a discount by booking a child seat.

He had been the one to drive Eddie to the airport, in the end. He had hugged him tightly, and made him promise to text when he was home safe, and watched as Eddie waved and grinned and headed to the departure lounge.

Eddie's smile was gone by the time he landed in New York.

Now, with Richie laughing in his ear, he tries to pretend that he isn't thousands of miles away. He tries to let himself think, just for a moment, that they are back in their youth; that he could hop out of his front door and be with Richie in the time it took to bike down a few streets.

It's a wonderful thought. He wishes it was real.

God, he misses Richie.

"Eddie gets off a good one!" Richie says gleefully. "I'll talk to you soon, buddy, okay? I should go hose myself off before I subject Stanley to my presence again."

"Yeah. Sure. I'll call you, sometime," Eddie says, and it feels like a promise. He glances at the door leading into the house, and sighs softly. "Have fun, okay?"

“You too, Eds. Uh, tell, uh... tell your wife I said hey, okay?” Richie adds suddenly, startling Eddie into a silence which stretches out slightly too long.

“Sure,” he says eventually. “Of course. Bye, Richie.”

“Bye, Eddie Spaghetti.”

Eddie goes inside, eventually.

He does not mention Richie to Myra.

2. Chapter 2

Notes for the Chapter:

In which Richie has his first gig since That One, and the author indulges her love of flashbacks, because Stan is worth it.

Warning for mentions of suicide attempts and thoughts, because Stan, though nothing as graphic as the movie to be honest.

The evening passes slowly, in a blur of conversation he is almost never fully tuned in to. Myra fusses over him as he robotically makes dinner, his thoughts a few thousand miles away, and eventually startles him into engaging by forcing his head up to peer into his eyes with a concerned expression.

He steps backwards out of her hold in surprise and promptly bangs his head on a cupboard with a curse.

“Oh, Eddie!” Her eyes widen as she begins to fret, reaching out to push her fingers through his hair and feel his scalp. “You have to be careful, honey! You know how clumsy you can be. Are you okay? It’s not bleeding? Do you need a painkiller?”

“What – no – it’s fine, it was barely even a bump,” Eddie says. He ducks away from her and straightens his hair as she watches him, visibly fretting.

“You know how head wounds can be, honey. We’ll have to keep an eye on it, and make sure it doesn’t open up. We really can’t risk you catching anything, with how delicate your immune system is.”

Her eyes stray to the scar on his cheek, and she reaches out towards it. “I still can’t believe *that* didn’t get infected.”

The pre-Derry Eddie would have wilted. Now, Eddie draws himself up and meets her gaze. “I’m fine,” he says firmly, and pushes her hand away from his face. “Please. Stop.”

“But your head -”

“- Has never been better,” Eddie says quickly. Her face scrunches into a worried expression, so he summons up a tight smile, and adds, “I promise, honey.”

Her eyes track over his scar again, as they have done so often since he came home from Derry, and her lips curl into a distressed pout. “I just wish you’d let Dr Phillips refer you to a plastic surgeon, Eddie-bear.”

“I don’t need one.”

“But I’m sure they could work wonders on -”

“- It’s fine,” Eddie says, his eyes fixed on the pot he’s stirring. It looks thin and pallid, and he does not anticipate it tasting good.

“They do such amazing work! You wouldn’t ever have to see it again!”

“I like seeing it,” Eddie snaps, and he does not consider the words before they pass his lips, but he realises that they are true as they ring in the silence between them. He clears his throat, and meets her eyes long enough to say, “It reminds me I can be brave.”

Myra opens her mouth, and Eddie resolutely returns his gaze to the soup.

He starts humming after a moment, and smiles to himself when Myra turns on her heel and stalks away with a huff.

He goes to bed early, his belly full of soup which, as he suspected, does not taste of anything much. But he feels pleasantly drowsy after eating, and sleep comes quickly.

It feels like a victory.

Eddie wakes the next morning to find a few messages on his phone.

Most are in the group chat, where he finds a picture of Stan and Richie eating dinner together; Richie is holding his phone at arm's length to get the two of them in, and is grinning cheesily into the camera while Stan offers a wry smile behind him. Everybody else has responded while he was sleeping.

Two messages, however, are from Stanley, sent to him privately. He opens them, and is met with a picture of Richie, apparently taken without him realising.

It shows him laughing, his eyes crinkled at the corners behind his glasses, and his smile bright and broad as a hand gestures wildly in the air. The other hand is in his hair, pushing it out of his eyes as he tilts his head back, displaying the line of his throat beneath his stubble.

The breath is punched from Eddie at the sight of it.

He stares at it for a long moment, surprised by the depth of his reaction. His stomach is swirling happily, a bubble of excitement growing at the pit, and he cannot help but feel a heated flush build at his cheeks.

It's probably just because Richie looks like he's enjoying himself. It's good to see his friend having fun. That has to be it.

Then he reads Stan's message.

Stan: *He was talking about you. He does that a lot.*

Eddie blinks in astonishment as his chest tightens. Not, he knows, due to a bullshit psychosomatic asthma diagnosis.

He saves the picture.

Later, hours later, when he's had time to wake up and distract himself with work, he builds up the courage to reply.

Eddie: *So what else is new? I've always been his favourite joke.*

Stan: *And there's nothing Richie likes more than a joke.*

Eddie frowns at the quick reply. His stomach tightens and he aims a defensive, accusatory scowl at the screen, as though Stanley can see him.

Eddie: *Very funny. Shouldn't you be paying attention to your conference?*

Stan: *Message received. I'll let you know how his gig goes.*

Eddie: *Thanks. Let me know how badly he bombs.*

Eddie puts his phone down, types two words into his computer, then sighs, and picks his phone back up.

Eddie: *And thanks for the picture.*

Stan does not reply, which he takes as the best possible representation of pointed smugness. Eddie furiously tells himself it does not mean Stan has won anything.

He irritably puts his phone in a drawer for the rest of the day, and ignores it until it is almost time for him to head home.

When he finally checks it, he finds the group chat has remained in unabatedly high spirits.

Mike has sent a series of photographs of himself on a beach, drinking something ostentatious and fruity while reading one of Bill's books, followed by a delighted shot of himself with a turtle, which has sent most of them through the roof with happiness. Ben has embarked on a campaign of texts trying to encourage Mike to adopt it, amongst which Bill's plaintive, "But what do you think of the book, Mike?" has apparently been lost.

Eddie chuckles as he scrolls through it all, ignoring his watch as it flashes a warning that traffic on his usual route home is looking bad.

The home at the end of the route looks no better, so he sees no reason to worry about getting there quickly.

Eventually, with the group chat exhausted – Mike eventually diplomatically tells Bill that he likes the book *so far*, which Bill takes with as much grace as he can muster – Eddie checks his other texts.

Richie: *shit eddie why the fuck did i agree to do this gig haha*

Eddie frowns at the message and realises with a quick stab of guilt that Richie sent it several hours ago.

He re-reads it a few times, and finds he is not sure what to make of it; it doesn't read like a genuine question, but something about it has his heart fluttering nervously.

Richie, while quick to play up his image as an enormous fumbling fuck-up, is not usually one for expressing serious anxiety in the face of anything less than, well, *It*. The idea of him being genuinely nervous about performing, about entertaining a crowd the way he has done practically since he could talk, is oddly upsetting.

Eddie sighs, and quickly types back.

Eddie: *Because you're an idiot.*

Eddie: *But I've heard some people are into that. Apparently some people are even willing to pay to see that!*

He sends his messages, then reads them over, and abruptly decides that the teasing tone he tried to get across instead reads as just plain mean.

The message changes to indicate Richie has seen it, and suddenly it feels lacking.

Is this all he has to offer to his best friend? An insult, and a backhanded compliment? Eddie's thumbs hover anxiously over the keypad, nervously itching to say more, but his brain offers nothing else.

His thoughts are paralysed in the face of a Richie who needs his support, and he feels a desperate surge of shame at his inability to say the right thing.

He killed a monster for Richie, once upon a time; tore Its face open using nothing but the power of belief and the desperate desire to see him safe.

He had been brave, then. Where is *that* Eddie now?

He sucks in a deep, whistling breath, and quickly forces his thumbs into action.

Eddie: *Seriously, it's going to be absolutely fine. You'll be amazing. You always are. I know you can do this. There's nothing you can't do.*

He grimaces as he watches Richie type, and then stop for a long moment, before he starts typing again; he fights the urge to send an apology before Richie can even say anything.

Richie: *where the hell do you get off man*

Eddie's heart stops in his chest as he reads Richie's response, but Richie sends a further flurry of texts before he can start backtracking and begging forgiveness.

Richie: *fucking believing in me*

Richie: *you asshole!*

Richie: *a dude just caught me crying in the bathroom*

Richie: *which to be fair is not the first time that has happened but it's always been for pretty different reasons than this*

Richie: *thanks eddie*

Richie: *i won't lie and say i definitely won't throw this in your face next time you're telling me that i'm a fucking moron but i really needed this right now*

Eddie stares in astonishment, then bursts into hysterical laughter.

Eddie: *I almost had a fucking heart attack! Fuck you man!*

Richie: *aww eddie don't you know i could never be mad at you???*

Richie: *not when i love my eddie spaghetti so gosh darn much <3*

Eddie blinks in surprise, then his heart begins to thud in his chest. He laughs to himself, and shakes his head.

He is ridiculous. Richie is even more ridiculous, and Eddie knows better than to rise to his baiting.

Eddie: *Yeah, yeah. Whoever is stupid enough to pay good money to see you – knock ‘em dead.*

He pauses, bites his lip, and self-consciously adds another message.

Eddie: *Love you too, Trashmouth.*

He heads down to his car and starts the drive home. When he gets there, after being caught in truly awful traffic for well over an hour, he checks his phone and finds a message from Richie. He opens it, and sees he has filled the screen with hearts.

He laughs, and ignores the beep from his watch it warns him about the sudden spike in his heart rate.

He drifts through his evening, restless but not quite willing to admit the reason why. He makes dinner, and eats it while Myra recounts her day, and indulges her in a discussion about one of her new co-workers, agreeing that yes, it was certainly audacious of them to start issuing new nicknames to the office staff within mere days of joining them.

His mind is not present at all.

When Myra decides to go upstairs and have a long, relaxing bath, having long since given up on trying to coquettishly entice Eddie into joining her to wash her back, Eddie finds himself mooching edgily around the house.

He turns on Netflix and watches ten minutes of a documentary on something or other, before turning it off with a huff. He reads most of chapter of one of Bill's books, then guiltily sets it down after realising he's not following it at all. He logs on to Facebook, sees one of his co-workers ranting about an unnamed fellow co-worker without any real attempt at subterfuge regarding who they mean, and irritably sets his laptop aside.

Eventually he gives up on his evening and goes to bed before Myra emerges from the tub. He checks his texts, scowls when he sees nothing from Richie or Stan, and before he can stop himself, finds himself typing Richie's name into YouTube. Endless clips present themselves to him.

He stifles a sigh, and begins watching. This, to his annoyance, keeps his attention.

It is not as though Eddie has never seen Richie's stand up before. When Richie revealed that he did not write his own material, Eddie had not felt astonishment, but vindication.

He remembers he would catch him on TV occasionally, stumbling across his specials or seeing him on various talk shows, and he had always had the same opinion of him; the one he voiced outwardly, in agreement with Myra, that this loud, scruffy, coarse guy just was not funny at all - and the confused, uncertain thought beneath it all, that whispered that something about him was weirdly familiar, but that none of what he was saying seemed like *him*.

Watching him now makes for a weird sense of cognitive dissonance.

He watches Richie lazily stroll around a variety of stages, looking simultaneously as familiar to Eddie as his own shadow and still older than he expects, and everything that comes out of his mouth sounds wrong.

Well. Almost everything.

Every now and then, amid the stream of hyper-masculine, ridiculously over the top lies about his sex life and the world's most long-suffering fictional girlfriend, Richie will say something which actually sounds like the person Eddie remembers.

It might be one of his old Voices, used for one of the unfortunate people having to deal with his shit in his stories, or a comment simultaneously sharp and stupid thrown at a heckler.

Every time it happens, it is as though the curtains have parted, and Eddie has caught a glimpse of the real Richie Tozier, hidden behind

them.

Those moments are the only times Eddie laughs. His heart aches dully in his chest.

Eventually, a notification interrupts one of the videos; a message from Stan.

He hurriedly clicks onto it, and finds a photograph posted in the group chat. It shows Richie, slumped tiredly in a chair with his hands fisted in his messy hair. Sweat shines on his forehead, and his face is pasty in the harsh light, but he aims a triumphant smile at the ceiling.

Stan: *Turns out Richie can be funny when he tries. Who knew?*

Eddie jolts upright in bed, his heart suddenly racing as a grin spreads across his face. It is ridiculous, but he feels suddenly victorious, as though he had in some way participated in Richie's success beyond just believing that it could happen.

That it *would* happen.

He kicks the covers aside and swings his legs out of bed, ignoring the chill which assails his bare feet as they rest on the hardwood floor. He clicks his bedside lamp on, suddenly wide awake.

Eddie: *Did people love it? Did many people show up? Did you laugh?*

Ben: *Haha! I knew Eddie wouldn't be asleep for this! :)*

Bev: *who could sleep through the triumphant return of the trashmouth!*

Ben: *Definitely not Eddie! :) :)*

Eddie scowls at Ben's comment, all too aware that his face is flushing. He knows damn well that he's never been able to hide his feelings; that his thoughts show on his face as they flit across his mind.

He also suspects, somewhere in the back of his mind, that this has always been doubly the case when it comes to Richie.

But why shouldn't he take an interest in his best friend's first gig since Derry? Richie has been through just as much as the rest of them, and left his career in shambles by running home to help. Of course Eddie cares that he's taking steps to rectify that.

He sets his jaw and his thumbs jab furiously at the keypad.

Eddie: *Were you there to see it? No! So shut up and let Stan talk!*

Ben: *I guess I asked for that...*

Bev: *i did tell you not to poke the bear sweetheart*

Eddie: *What the hell is that supposed to mean?*

Bev: *nothing!*

Ben: *Nothing Eddie! Sorry! :(*

Stan: *Maybe we should all just go to bed. We'll all have clearer heads in the morning.*

Eddie: *Tell me how the fuck it went before I drive there and beat the answers out of you myself!*

Bill: *Question, Mike - what are the rules on beeping people other than Richie? If we ever made any I've forgotten them. Asking for a friend...*

Mike: *You know, I don't think it ever occurred to us to try?*

Mike: *I'm not saying the rest of us never deserved it, but I don't think we ever thought anybody but Richie would go along with it.*

Mike: *How interesting! I don't even know why it ever worked on Richie. Any theories?*

Eddie is aware that his teeth are grinding together in frustration. He is about to go off on a rant when he sees that Stan is typing, and forces himself to suck in a deep breath.

He fills his lungs, holds it for a second, and breathes out in a slow whoosh, trying to force out his frustration along with it.

It doesn't work, but at least it takes up some time while Stan types.

Stan: *It was a college open mic night. The kid running it told me they often ask comedians to come along, but only asked Richie as a joke. They were blown away when he said yes. Apparently, nobody this big has ever said yes before. Richie told them he doesn't count as big anymore, and that his aim for the gig was just to get through it without vomiting. The place was small, but it was packed. Maybe 200 people came. Other people went on first and Richie closed the show.*

Stan: *And yes, Eddie, he was funny, and I laughed quite a few times. Everyone was laughing. He was obviously nervous, and I think everybody could tell as much, but he was very sharp. He talked about his last show, and how badly it went, and spun it into a story about being just about to head home for a "reunion" and finding out that a serial killer was on the loose there right before he went on stage. He mostly talked about that "reunion" for his set. I won't spoil it for you, because I'm sure he'll be doing more gigs after this and you should all see it for yourselves, but his impression of Ben falling into the clubhouse was particularly well-received.*

Bev: *haha!!*

Ben: *I suppose I'm glad somebody got something out of that D:*

Ben: *Wait, does this mean I get to take partial credit for what is definitely the start of Richie's comeback?*

Richie: *you've always been an inspiration haystack so i guess I can give you 5% of the nothing i earned from this gig if you really really need it mr bigshot architect*

Richie: *also i know you're all wondering and yes i got through without blowing chunks!*

Richie: *so success achieved bitches!!*

Stan: *Didn't you vomit pre-show?*

Richie: *ugh i knew i couldn't sneak anything past you*

Stan: *Nobody can. Nothing. Ever. I know all of your secrets.*

Bill: *Damn, Stan.*

Bev: *was stanley always this terrifying?*

Mike: *...moving past the fact that Stan is apparently all-knowing – well done, Richie! I'm so proud of you!*

Ben: *Me too! Well done Richie! I knew you could do it!*

Bev: *yeah well done trashmouth! I'm proud of you kiddo!*

Bill: *Same! You'll be selling out theatres in no time!*

Ben: *We love you! Remember us when you're a megastar! Again!*

Richie: *guys! thanks! it was just a bunch of drunk students so whatever but thanks!*

Eddie scowls at his screen again, snapped out of mulling over Stan's description of the show with Richie's dismissive comment. He glances once again at the picture Stan had sent them, taking in the sheer relief which seems to be rolling off Richie, and begins typing furiously.

Eddie: *Shut the fuck up dipshit!*

Eddie: *This is a big deal and you know it! This is the first time you've performed in months AND it was all your own material, right? You must have been terrified, regardless of who was watching you! We're all so goddamn proud of you for doing this! Don't you fucking dare minimise this! We're proud of you and we love you! Fuck off!*

He breaks off with a flush as everyone begins to react, laughing emojis flooding the chat, along with a fearful one from Ben. Finally, as he re-reads his message and begins to panic about how stark it looks, Richie responds.

Richie: *there's my sweet eddie!!!*

Richie: *okay everyone please allow me to rephrase*

Richie: *thank you all sincerely for believing in me*

Richie: *i love you all too*

Richie: *and please consider me well and truly fucked off <3*

Eddie sighs in relief. It's probably not good, that any attempt at encouraging or complimenting Richie comes out as a furious rant, but he just can't help himself. He's never been able to find a better way to get through to him, and at least Richie always seems to respond positively to it.

He sets his phone down, meaning to finally try for sleep – it's past ten-thirty, and as wired as he is after Richie's success, he still has work tomorrow – when the screen lights up with a text. He picks it back up, and sees Stan's name.

He has sent another picture of Richie, this time bent over his phone, apparently unaware that Stanley is photographing him. He looks no less tired than in the previous picture, and his hair is a matted, sweat-damp tangle atop his head, but Eddie's heart clenches at his expression; he wears a soft, fond smile, gentler than any Eddie would normally associate with Richie, and his eyes are shining and crinkled at the corners as he gazes at his phone.

Stan: *Just thought you would like to see his reaction to those messages you sent.*

His breath catches in his throat. What is Stan implying?

Eddie swallows hard as his heart begins to jackrabbit in his chest. It is ridiculous; he's not even sure what he's panicking about. All Stan has done is send him a picture of his best friend reacting to a message Eddie himself had sent.

Stan does know all of them very well; he probably realised that Eddie would work himself up into a tizzy, wondering if Richie would take his frustrated flurry of texts badly. He's probably just trying to reassure him.

It's just a sweet gesture. That's all.

He breathes for a moment, trying to calm himself, before he replies.

Eddie: *Not sure why? But thanks I guess*

Eddie has time to re-make his tousled bedclothes and go to the bathroom before Stan, after stopping and starting typing, eventually sends his reply.

Stan: *You know, sometimes I wonder how any of you made it into your forties while being this dense. Good night.*

Eddie: *What the fuck Stanley?*

Stan: *Good night, Eddie.*

Eddie's flush could set the sheets aflame, and if he gives his pillow a few frustrated punches in the name of getting it into a comfortable shape, Stan does not need to know.

Sleep takes a while to find him, what with the excitement over Richie's success and the palpable feeling of Stan's knowing gaze raking over him, but Eddie must drop off at some point, because he startles awake when his phone begins to buzz on his nightstand.

He levers himself upright and fumbles for it, groaning first at the sudden light from the screen, and then when he sees the time; three twenty-eight.

He blearily realises it is Richie's name that has popped up on his screen before he answers with a mumbled, "I got work tomorrow, so this better be important, dickwad."

He hears Richie's breathe catch for a second, and then he speaks. "You mean you got work *today*. Sorry, man, I'll call you another time. It's nothing. Go back to sleep."

Eddie flops back down against his pillow with a frown. Richie sounds genuinely apologetic, which is rare enough to catch his attention, but exhaustion lies behind his words, and... and something else, beneath it all. Something he can't quite parse. "Y'called at three in the morning for nothing?"

“No, I – it’s – nothing that can’t wait,” Richie amends. He’s whispering, and sounds strangely echoey. “Seriously, go back to sleep. Sorry.”

“Where are you? Y’sound weird,” Eddie asks around a yawn.

“I’m in my hotel room. In the bathroom. Look, forget about it, okay? I’ll leave you alone. Go back to sleep.”

“Why’re you whispering?” Eddie asks, before a thought occurs. He rolls over, mashing his phone into the pillow as he half-lies on it. “Oh, Stan’s staying with you, right. You’re trying not to wake him?”

“I’m pretty sure he’s awake. He woke *me*.”

His brows draw together in confusion. “Then why’re you whispering?”

“Oh.” Richie pauses, and Eddie hears him shuffling about for a moment, before he huffs a tired laugh. “Then I dunno, I guess. He’s probably trying to sleep. I don’t wanna keep him up.”

“But you want to keep me up,” Eddie sighs, even though his heart isn’t in it. “Asshole.”

“That’s me,” Richie agrees. “Listen, Eds -”

“- Don’t lie to me,” says Eddie easily. Richie falls silent, and Eddie curls his legs up to his chest as he snuggles down into the duvet. “And don’t call me that, I guess, though I feel like the boat has sailed on that one. Why’d you call, Richie?”

He hears Richie shuffling around some more, and draws on his limited supplies of patience to wait him out. It is late, and he’s sleepy, and he’s already dreading trying to function at work later, but the one thing he has going for him right now is that the only person in this friend group with less patience than him is Richie.

Eventually, Richie sighs, and when he speaks, his voice is muffled, as though he’s speaking through his hands. “Stan had a nightmare.”

“Okay,” Eddie says, puzzled when nothing further is offered. “That

sucks. Is he okay?”

“He... he said he was. But man, he – he was kinda... thrashing. And crying. Sobbing, really,” Richie admits, offering the information at a glacial pace. He sighs again, and the sound tugs at Eddie’s chest.

He wishes, abruptly, that he was there to listen in person; that he could reach out and put a hand on Richie’s knee and squeeze, the way he had only ever had the chance to when the two of them were alone together in their youth.

Richie was not the kind of person to cry with other people around to see it.

When in a group, no matter how miserable he was, Richie was always more likely to repress it; to push it down, and ignore his feelings in favour of distracting others with jokes, or insults, or whatever misdirection he could manage.

But sometimes, when it was just the two of them... sometimes, when they were alone in the clubhouse, crammed together in that tiny hammock, something changed.

Sometimes Richie’s walls came tumbling down, and Eddie was allowed to see him for real. To see a Richie who shook with tears, and who reached out desperately for comfort, even if all Eddie could offer was a hug, and a shoulder to lean on while Richie cried himself out.

And then, almost before it began, it was over.

It always went the same way. One minute Richie was weeping against Eddie’s side, and then the next he was scrubbing his eyes dry and shoving his glasses back on with a manic smile fixed suddenly in place. Eddie was always left reeling as Richie laughed about being a fucking *pussy*, and then life went on as it always had, as though nothing had even happened at all.

They never spoke about the handful of times it had happened. Eddie wonders, suddenly, if anybody else had ever been allowed to see Richie like that.

"It must have been bad, if he woke you up," he offers. "You sleep like the dead."

Richie snorts. "He fuckin' kicked me, dude," he grumbles, and suddenly Eddie's stomach swirls.

"You're sharing a bed?" he asks, and squeezes his eyes shut when Richie laughs.

"Of course we are! I wouldn't talk him into sharing with me and then make him take the floor, man. And I'm sure as hell not in good enough shape to give up the bed. My spine would, like, fall right off."

"Right," Eddie breathes, as his treacherous brain suddenly presents him with a crystal-clear image.

He pictures Richie and Stan going through their evening routines together. He pictures Richie brushing his teeth and talking throughout, toothpaste dribbling down his jaw while Stan rolls his eyes but listens anyway, an amused curl to his lips. Then his mind skips on to the two of them climbing into bed together, inching closer and closer through the night until Richie is curled up around Stan, nosing at his neck with an arm slung comfortably across his waist.

It is ridiculous. *Eddie* is ridiculous. What does it matter to him if two of his friends are sharing a bed?

They're just friends, after all. Nothing is going to happen. Neither of them swing that way, and even if they did, Stan is happily married.

Eddie is married.

And none of this is *any* of his business.

He forces his eyes open, breathes deeply, and says, "What did he dream about?"

Richie is silent for a long time, before he murmurs, "He wouldn't tell me. I just know... it was bad. Like, really bad. I can tell."

"Well, okay. We all have nightmares, though, right?"

Eddie certainly does. But at least he can say that he no longer gets them every night; not even most nights, by this point. Their frequency seems to be dying down, as they move further away from everything that happened. But he still gets them, now and then.

They are still awful, of course, like a film reel whirling endlessly in his head, replaying sights he would rather forget.

But if remembering them is the price he has to pay for remembering his friends too, then Eddie thinks he can probably deal with the occasional night of waking up shivering and bathed in sweat.

He purses his lips, and suggests, "I think having nightmares is pretty normal, right? After everything we went through. It's probably the only normal thing about any of us!"

"Right. Yeah. No, we all have nightmares, right. I know."

Richie falls silent again, and Eddie practically can see him in his mind's eye; wearing a threadbare t-shirt, slumped against the side of the bath on the floor of some hotel bathroom, glasses off and squinting myopically into the darkness as he fiddles with the hem of his boxers. "It's just... it was so bad, Eddie. I think maybe... worse than -"

"- It's not a competition, asshole," Eddie scowls, and Richie immediately produces a strangled noise.

"No. I know. I'm sorry, jeez. I... Fucking... God, I can't even find the words for this when I *am* awake," he groans. "Sorry, Eds. I know we're all going through it. I just... I recognise... Ugh."

"Recognise what?" Eddie asks. His nose scrunches up as a mix of irritation and confusion washes over him. "What're you trying to say, Trashmouth?"

"He has a huge fucking scar," Richie blurts instead, his breath speeding, and Eddie abruptly realises what else is underlying his voice; he sounds panicked enough to make Eddie's thoughts reel away from the subject at hand.

"What?"

“On his arm. Y’know, where he... Y’know. Where It almost got him.”

The terrified shake to Richie’s voice is enough to send Eddie’s memories flying back several months, and suddenly he can picture their time in Derry flickering in his mind’s eye like scenes from a horror movie. It is as though he is present in Derry all over again, reduced to a helpless observer, watching their ordeal unfold around him from behind his own eyes.

He sees the six of them as they were at the restaurant, laughing and living it up, even as their curious gazes turn to the conspicuously empty seat at their table.

Then Stanley’s name is finally mentioned, and Richie immediately dismisses the idea that he might turn up with crude name-calling. Eddie’s brow wrinkles in confusion despite not even being able to picture Stan’s face, because sure, their memories are still as patchy as a moth-eaten blanket, but he remembers Stan and Richie being brothers in everything but blood.

His memory flashes forward to the fortune cookies. He feels horror sinking past the alcohol saturating their brains to send them shrinking into corners, shrieking and fighting back against gruesome terrors which can’t possibly be real. Can they?

Welcome home, Losers.

He remembers watching Bev call Stan, and his wife weeping down the line as she struggles through an explanation none of them want to hear. “He... he hurt himself... then came to find me, before... before he... We’re in the hospital now, but, but they think -”

“- They think he cut himself so badly that it’ll be a miracle if he makes it,” Bev finishes before Patricia can. Eddie feels a deep well of grief rise up in his chest, but beneath it, a growing confusion, because okay, what the fuck, how could Bev *know that*?

That, it seems, is that. The lucky seven, down to six not-so-lucky Losers.

They find Ben's carefully constructed clubhouse and marvel at his skill. They find Stan's token, and laugh about it, because it's either laugh or cry, and they suddenly feel like maybe they need to get their laughs in while they can.

"You having any good chucks?" he remembers Richie saying in their youth, and the six of them suddenly need laughter more than they ever have before.

They sit around in the clubhouse and remember Stan as he had been, a face which had been fuzzy suddenly crystal-clear in their minds; curling hair styled as neatly as he could manage, his eyes rolling at the antics of the others around him, even as his lips quirk into a reluctant smile. So smart. So sensible. So afraid.

Too afraid to keep going, in the end.

And all of them silently wondering just how bad things were going to get if even just the sound of Mike's voice was enough to convince Stan that *this* was the best way forward.

They split up. They find their tokens. They go back to the townhouse.

Eddie gets stabbed in the face, which is still the number one theme of his occasional nightmares, but hey, he gives as good as he gets in return, and there is a rush of triumph before the rising nausea.

He remembers all over again the feeling of blood spurting from his mouth, coating his teeth, his *tongue*, the taste of it coppery and hot as he swallows.

But they have no time to do more than apply a quick bandage, because suddenly they are running desperately to the library as they panic about Mike.

Eddie's pulse pounds in his ears at the thought of what they might find – but somehow, despite catching Richie in the act of burying an axe in Henry Bowers' head, despite Mike being seconds away from dying, the most unbelievable part of all is that Stan is there too.

The urge to enfold him in their arms battles with the fear that this is Pennywise, donning the guise of their friend to toy with them further,

but Richie damn-near explodes when Ben miserably suggests as much.

There is vomit on his chin and a wild look in his eyes as he moves to stand protectively between Stan and the rest of them. "Of fucking course it's Stan! You don't think I'd *know*?"

"But Richie – It can look however it wants -"

"- This is Stanley, okay? I know him. I *know*."

"How?" Beverly asks quietly, her eyes fixed on Stan with something close to wonder.

"Because he... he told me something only Stan could know," Richie says, and suddenly his eyes drop to the floor, and the anger thrumming through him morphs into something quieter and more muted; embarrassment, Eddie thinks later, as he goes back over the moment.

Or maybe shame.

Ben still edges forwards with a hand held out in supplication, reaching out to Richie as though to tug him away from Stan. "It knows so much more than we realise, Rich."

"Not this." Richie shakes his head, and steps away from Ben to toss an arm around Stan's shoulders. His face is wan, but his jaw is set in determination. "Because if It knew *this*, It would definitely be using the details to torture me. And It hasn't. All my memories of that moment are still good."

Eddie remembers thinking that it seemed as though nothing short of a geological movement would be powerful enough to make him let go of Stan in that moment.

His eyes fix on Stan's face, and though he is trembling, and pale, paler than Eddie thinks it is possible for anyone still standing upright to be, the look he gives Richie at that moment is so warm. He looks grateful for the support, sure, but he also looks incredibly proud.

As though Richie has really done something amazing.

At the time, Eddie had felt as though they were intruding on something private, and had looked away with a flush.

He still doesn't know what Richie meant. He's not sure how to ask.

Whatever Richie means, his vehemence proves enough to convince them. This is their Stanley.

He seems close to breaking point, a near-ruin of a man; his hair is lank and his skin is almost translucent, and there is a brittle, tight set to his face, and when he shifts in place, his shirt sleeve rises up enough to reveal a tightly bandaged forearm that sets Eddie's stomach churning, but it is *him*.

He explains what happened with his eyes darting around the room, taking in their boots, the books around them, the door; refusing to meet their gaze as he speaks. His voice is quiet, and slow, but steady. "When I got Mike's call, a lot slotted into place for me. I realised why I have so many nightmares, and what they mean."

"What they mean?" Bev asks softly, but Stan's eyes meet hers only briefly before he goes on.

"And I realised that the people I see in them are all of you."

"As kids?" Eddie murmurs, because he remembers dreaming of faceless children too; children who never failed to slip from his mind as he woke.

Stan hesitates briefly, his eyes darting to Beverly again to see her lips pursing, before he nods.

"Yes. As... as we were, back then. And..." His voice trails off. Richie tightens his arm around him, and Stan shoots him a small, grateful look. "I was certain of two things after speaking to Mike: that this was our last chance to beat It, and that we could not do that with me around. That if I came back to Derry I would only hold you all back. So I... I took myself off the board."

"Stan!"

"That's bullshit -"

"You're *not* -"

"- I *know*. I know. I don't think that's true. Honestly, I don't think that was actually my own thought at all. I think It managed to get to me," he says quietly.

Bev swallows. "From so far away?"

"Yes." Stan produces a tight smile. "I always was the weakest of us, after all. I suppose I was easiest to reach for that reason."

Richie scowls in genuine fury, and the expression looks so stupidly wrong on him that Eddie is left blinking in astonishment. "Don't fucking say that about yourself!" he snaps, as though he had not been the first to suggest that Stan would not show up.

Eddie wonders, later, just how much guilt Richie is feeling about that.

Stan takes a deep breath, glancing sidelong at Richie, but does not argue. "So I wrote some letters to you all, and I... I told my wife I was going to take a bath." He raises his bandaged arm weakly. "And I did what I thought I had to do."

"I'm so glad it didn't work," Mike says softly.

"It almost did. I really think if I had left it just a little while longer, then it would have. But after I... started, I suddenly thought of all of us," Stan murmurs, and holds up his other hand to show them the scar splitting his palm.

Eddie unconsciously glances at his own, thumbing along the ridge of it as Stan speaks. "I saw this, and remembered the promise we made, and it was as though my mind cleared. I think I fought It off."

"Stanley..."

"Patty heard me shouting for help, and she called 911," he goes on, his voice as steady as if he was discussing the weather. "That was two days ago now. They patched me up, as much as they could, and then I self-discharged from the psychiatric ward."

Everyone bursts into alarmed responses. “Stan!”

“Jesus! You don’t think you should be -”

“- I had to come here,” he says quietly, but when he raises his eyes, there is steel behind his gaze. “I *had* to. They were talking about sectioning me, for a while. My wife... Patty is...” He swallows. “I told her what happened, back then. Some of it, anyway. She agrees that some of the things she’s heard me saying in my sleep make sense now, at least.”

“She sounds like a hell of a woman,” Richie says, stunned, and when Stan smiles, it is like the sun has come out.

“She’s the best. She let me go, in the end. But not before she made me promise to come back to her.” His mouth flattens. “And I keep my promises. We have to do this, guys.”

“When did you get here?” Eddie asks.

“Earlier this afternoon. I was going to call Mike when I got here, but when I got into town I... I just felt like I had to go to temple. I knew in my gut it was where I should go.” He nudges Richie gently in the side. “And that’s where I found him.”

“Richie?”

“Yeah. Well. Truth be told, guys, I was on my way outta Dodge,” Richie admits, and Eddie turns his eyes to him plaintively. Richie groans, and covers his face. “I know, all right? Don’t turn those fucking eyes on me, Eddie! I panicked, okay? Excuse me for thinking this whole goddamn situation is crazy. I was driving out of town and telling myself you’d all be fine, like a liar, and... and then I saw Stan-the-Man drifting around outside his dad’s old stomping ground like a fucking ghost.”

“I talked some sense into him,” Stan says with a trace of a smile. “Once he believed it was me.”

“And here we are,” Richie agrees. He frowns as he looks at the group. “Most of us, anyway. Where’s Bill?”

They manage to get in one desperate, clinging group hug before they realise Bill is on his way to Niebolt Street, and they're back to following at his heels the same way they always have.

Eddie keeps an eye on Stan as they ran through town, watching for any signs of him flagging, but he remains determinedly upright despite the faint blue tinge to his lips.

They go into Its house on Niebolt, going deeper than they ever thought possible. They try Mike's ritual, and feel like they get within an inch of it working, and then Eddie watches them all scatter when it goes horribly wrong.

Richie, Eddie, and Stan end up running away together, with Richie's hands clamped firmly around each of their wrists.

And despite their best efforts, Richie...

Richie ends up in the deadlights.

Watching it flash past his mind's eye is no less awful than watching it happen in the first place.

He sees Richie's determined stride lurch to an awkward stop. He sees his eyes roll back, and watches the blood trickle weirdly upwards as Richie *rises* and hangs, just as Beverly once had. He remembers his own heart stuttering in his chest, skipping like a broken record, because no, *no*, not him.

Not Richie.

And Eddie remembers, as clear as day, what happened next.

He sees himself striding forward with the fence post brandished in his hands like a spear, putting himself in Its sights because this was Richie, It had *Richie*, and every part of Eddie was screaming that he had to help. That he had to end this, right now, because Richie needed him.

"You're braver than you think."

He remembers launching the post clear through Its fucking face and

hearing It shriek loud enough to shake the cavern around them.

Richie falls to the floor, and Eddie climbs atop him to declare, “I think I killed It!” as his chest swells with pride and happiness and... and... something he cannot name, something which fills him up and makes him feel like he could do anything right now.

But Richie just stares up at him in something akin to horror, seemingly paralysed after emerging from the deadlights.

Eddie beams down at him, and waits for Richie to pull himself together. There is no rush. It is dead, after all.

He remembers thinking dizzily, “We have the rest of our lives,” as he looks down at Richie, the thought floating across his mind from nowhere.

And then he hears a sudden frantic shout, and sees Stanley barrelling towards them from the side of his vision, and Eddie finds himself pushed violently to one side. He bounces hard over rocks and water, all three of them colliding painfully until they skid to a stop in a heap, winded and groaning.

And barely a second later, Eddie sees a monstrous claw slam down exactly where he had been kneeling atop Richie.

A frustrated shriek echoes around the cave, and Stan scrambles upright, and pulls both of them after him with a desperate, “Run!”

His memory is blurrier after that, a mess of fear and tight lungs and near misses, but he remembers figuring out how to kill It, with the feeling of the leper shrinking beneath his hands suddenly stark in his mind.

And then... all of them. All of them, together, hands overlapping on Its hideous heart and moving together to crush it.

He remembers watching a fresh crimson trickle stain Stan’s bandages anew as his hand moves, and Stan hardly even seeming to notice, so firm is his grip.

He changes the bandages for him, later, grimly ignoring the churning

of his stomach as he wraps the material over a long line of stitches.

It really got ol' Stanley good. There could be no doubting that it would scar. Of course Stan would bear Its mark for the rest of his life.

At least, despite Its best efforts, Stan still has a life to live.

"Eddie?" Richie's voice snaps him back into the present with a jump.

Eddie's hand snakes up from his warm cocoon to brush over his own cheek. "Aren't you always telling me chicks dig scars?" he asks dryly, as though Myra has ever been anything but horrified by his.

Richie offers a quiet laugh. "Right. Yeah. Maybe Patty's into it. I... I think probably not, though, huh?"

"Probably not," Eddie agrees. His own scar tingles beneath his touch, and he suddenly remembers the feel of Richie squeezing his shoulder as he told him he was braver than he thought.

He fills his lungs as a flush of warmth rushes through him. "But at least she still has him. At least he was strong enough to get help when he needed it. He's fine, Richie. He's still around to *have* a scar, right?"

"Yeah. Shit, yeah." Richie shuffles in place, and Eddie hears the sound of bare feet padding around on tiles as he paces. "She still has him. Stan's still here, and I'm so... I'm so fuckin' glad. God, this is stupid, right? I didn't even remember him a few months ago, and now I'm like, freaking out about what the fuck I would even do if Stanley had fuckin' beefed it! Thanks, Eddie," he adds abruptly, and Eddie's head spins again.

"For what?"

"For... this."

"What?"

“For... I don’t know. Just for you, I guess? Stan had a nightmare, it freaked me out, so I called you to fix me,” Richie laughs softly, a sheepish undercurrent to his voice. “Stupid, right? You’re just... always the first person I want to talk to when I’m...”

“When you’re what?” Eddie whispers. He is trembling, he realises, shivering at Richie’s words.

Richie hesitates, starts to say something, and then sighs softly. “When I’m horny, of course,” he drawls eventually, and Eddie rolls over with a groan.

“Beep *fucking* beep, Richie.”

“Right. Sure. Listen, it’s super fucking late, sorry, I should go.”

But a thought strikes Eddie as he tries to sign off. “Wait! While I have you -”

“- Oh, Eddie Spaghetti, you *always* have me, baby.”

“Shut the fuck *up*, Trashmouth,” Eddie grumbles, his heart not in it. He is suddenly, desperately curious. “Why does it work?”

Richie makes a muffled noise of confusion. “Why does what work?”

“What Mike asked earlier. Us beeping you. I don’t even remember why we do it.”

“Me either.”

“So why does it work?” Eddie presses. “You talk and talk and talk and we can tell you to shut up forever, and you never do, but as soon as one of us says ‘beep beep’, it’s like, quiet time from Richie. Why?”

“I mean, it’s pretty easy, when you think about it,” Richie says after a moment. “You really don’t know?”

“I don’t know fucking anything at four in the morning, asshole, forgive me for needing it spelled out to me.”

Richie sighs again, and Eddie can hear the tiredness behind his

words. “When you beep me, I know that’s when I’ve really pushed something too far, so I drop it before you all drop *me*.”

Eddie blinks in confusion. “What? What do you mean?” he asks, and Richie laughs in return. There is no humour in it.

“C’mon, Eddie. Where else would I go if I lost you all through running my fucking mouth? Who the hell else would take me in?”

“Richie,” Eddie breathes, as ice settles in his stomach. “No.”

“No?” Richie lets out a sharp bark of laughter. “Tell that to the past twenty-seven years. It’s not like anybody ever came close to replacing you all.”

“No,” Eddie repeats firmly. “Fuck that. No! You’re not – we would never do that to you. Fuck, that’s not... that’s not it at all!”

“You *just* said you don’t know why you do it,” Richie points out, and now he really does sound amused, as though Eddie has said something genuinely funny.

“I fucking know it isn’t *that*!” Eddie spits. His stomach is churning miserably. “Richie, fucking... listen to me, okay?”

“Okay,” Richie says agreeably, and Eddie sets his jaw.

“We love you. We love you, okay? I swear, I could not possibly mean that more than I do,” he says, and in the darkness, with his wedding ring suddenly feeling heavier than it has a right to, it feels more like a confession than reassurance.

He swallows hard and forges ahead, ignoring the way his heart is fluttering in his throat. There’s no reason for him to get caught up on telling his best friend that he is loved just because he’s too tired to think straight.

“We will never... fuckin’... *drop* you, or whatever bullshit is bouncing around in your stupid skull. You’re a part of us. We love you! Wherever the beeping came from, it has never, ever meant that, and it never will. I promise. Please believe me?”

There is silence for longer than Eddie feels he can stand, and then he hears a snuffle, and Richie clears his throat. "Okay. Sure. Okay, Eddie, jeez. I love you too. Uh, all of you. I love all of you, too."

The ice in his stomach begins to thaw, bit by bit. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. I believe you. I promise. If only because you're fucking terrifying when you're saying meaningful shit. Thank god I'm not actually there to see it. I bet you're doing those killer puppy-dog eyes you do, aren't you? I'd be fuckin' crying if you were here."

"I wish I was there," Eddie says, without thinking, and his eyes slam open as his heart clenches tightly.

He means it. Holy shit, does he mean it.

Richie laughs softly. "Yeah. Me too, Eduardo. Hey, listen, for-fucking-reals, though, I gotta let you sleep. You gotta be bright-eyed and bushy-tailed for a long day of terrifying people with statistics, right?"

"And god, you really need your beauty sleep," Eddie snarks right back at him, and Richie laughs loud enough that Eddie is sure Stan is probably awake once again.

"We can't all be handsome-as-hell, weirdly-jacked, forty-year-old boy-men!"

"I guess there was a compliment somewhere in there," Eddie allows. He rolls onto his back, shrouded in the darkness of his guest bedroom, and smiles shyly.

It feels like folly, allowing himself to be flattered by Richie's ebullience, but he has never been able to help himself when it comes to Richie. "You grew up handsome enough, y'know. Considering what you looked like as a teenager."

"Oh, Lord have mercy on me, Edward is gracing me with his kind words," Richie drawls in what Eddie thinks of as his southern belle Voice. It is, he has to admit, much improved from what he remembers. He can picture Richie fanning himself wildly as he speaks. "I must tell Mama! Daddy will be thrilled! Maybe Edward will even add his name to my dance card?"

“I’m not doing the fucking *Cha Cha Slide* with you, Richie,” Eddie groans, and grins as Richie laughs again.

“Night, Eddie. Hey – thanks again, okay?”

“Any time,” Eddie smiles. “Night, Richie.”

It takes a long time before Eddie can get back to sleep. He cannot help but wish he was somewhere else.